CHAPTER VI

THE last war of any importance, as I have stated, was that between Sharjah and Dubai in 1940. The cause of the war was a long-standing feud between the tribes of Bani Yas (Dubai) and Qasimi (Sharjah). There was also a dispute over territorial limits claimed by the sheikhs. The sheikhdom of Dubai is composed of two distinct districts; Dubai town proper, on the west of the creek, and Dera, on the north side. The largest and better-built houses, mostly inhabited by Indian and Persian merchants, as well as the more important shops of the pearl brokers, carpet sellers and gold-smiths, are situated in Dubai town. Here one finds cool, clean narrow streets with high walls, often overhung with Persian rugs to keep off the sun, and pleasant open shops where one may buy anything from a five hundred years' old Bokhara rug or a brass-bound Quaiti chest, to an American wrist-watch or a roll of bread. In the poorer section of Dera, where the fishermen and coolies live, there is a native bazaar and several long streets of shops, but these are dirty, dark and infested with flies. There one may buy items of gaudy Arab clothing, tobacco leaves, and dried food, including fish, spices, nuts, ghee butter, henna bark and rice. Some alley-ways are devoted entirely to silversmiths and tinsmiths; the latter are clever craftsmen and can make almost any domestic utensil out of an empty petrol can.

For several hundred years Dubai (which includes, besides the town, several villages and a tract of desert of about fifty square miles), has been ruled by the Al Bu Falaah branch of the Bani Yas clan, who are related to another Al Bu Falaah family, the sheikhs of Abu Dhabi (the 'Place of Gazelles'). Rivalry between the sheikhs of Dubai and their cousins in Dera, on the other side of the creek, may be traced back as far as 1850, when the Ak Bu Mahair family, their cousins, intrigued for ownership of the region. The Mahair were notorious pirates. A British gunboat had occasion to land a ship's crew at Dera to investigate an attack on a merchant ship in Dubai waters. Soon after the sailors from the gunboat had landed they were waylaid in a dark side street and murdered; as a

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

[Sharjah bazaar]

291 who wear the finery. Their *abbas*, or ankle-length gowns, are of silk or linen, sometimes of a coarse, sackcloth material, but they are dyed in a variety of colours, from red and brown to purple, and those of the merchants are hemmed and embroidered with gold and silver thread. The head-dress is often of brightly-coloured silk, bound with an *aggal*, and the crescent-shaped sandals are invariably decorated with stencilled dyes or gold thread. The wealthier
301 classes are fond of displaying jewellery, and like to wear large pearl or diamond rings on their fingers; some wear ear-rings, giving them a piratical air, whilst others wear or carry amber necklaces, which they use for meditation and prayer as a Christian will use his rosary.

443 The shops in the bazaar are closed from midday to four o'clock,
512 as the Arabs take a siesta after lunch—a custom bequeathed by their Moorish cousins to the Spaniards and observed in Spain to this day. This adjournment is not due to laziness, but is extremely practical, since the hottest time of the day occurs after twelve o'clock. At 4 p.m. the sun loses most of its heat and the streets are pleasantly cool. The shutters are then pulled down from the shop fronts, and the bazaar is thronged with gaily-dressed crowds of shoppers and sightseers.

443 The shops are merely open booths, or stalls, exposed to sand
326 and flies, with the living quarters behind. As in China and
467 mediæval Europe, some of the trades, such as those of the tinsmiths, silversmiths and leather merchants, are protected by guilds, and the members confine themselves to special parts of the town or bazaar. Thus in Sharjah there is a Street of Silversmiths, where these merchants exercise their craft to the exclusion of all other trades; Dubai similarly has a Street of Goldsmiths. These titles sound as though they had been taken from *Hassan* or the *Arabian Nights* and, indeed, the streets bear some resemblance to an Eastern stage setting.

443 The food shops are always interesting. The wares are displayed in little palm-weave panniers, and include cinnamon, nutmegs, ginger and spices, huge lumps of unrefined rock salt, dried peas and beans, attar flour, ghee butter, pea-nuts, curry powder, chicory and rice. Under the shop front hang rows of locally-grown tobacco leaves, strips of henna, and various kinds of salted, odorous dried fish. A variety of smells, pungent and aromatic, comes from these booths in the hot weather and can be detected from quite a distance.

The most colourful shops are those of the drapers, where the

252 a grid-iron, and placed directly on the glowing embers of the oven. Baked in this manner, the flat loaves of unleavened bread were crisp and brown in a few minutes, and tasted delicious. Arab children would crowd round the bakers' shop in little groups, fascinated by the dexterity with which the baker tossed the dough into the air with the ladle before consigning it to the fire.

• 326 In the quarter of the town where the tinsmiths and ironsmiths plied their trades, one could always be sure of finding something of interest. Here the shops of the blacksmiths exhibit all their primitive skill. A sheep's or pig's bladder is used as a bellows, and the fire, anvil and the blacksmith are all contained in a deep pit. Tools, nails, wrought-iron ornaments and domestic utensils are made in this crude manner from long iron bars, or 'scrap', [415] which is imported from India. The tinsmiths are equally dexterous in the manufacture of pots, pans, kettles and bowls, the basic material for which is provided out of old R.A.F. petrol cans. Some of the tin bowls are extremely decorative, being washed in copper and engraved with a hand-beaten design.

As we strolled away from the bazaar we encountered Hassan bin Ahmidfa, the young pearl merchant; he proved to be an excellent guide and companion, having a good sense of humour. He conducted us through a maze of alleyways until we came to the Street of Silversmiths, where wrinkled old men sat cross-legged, making their trinkets. Hossein, a white-haired smith with a beard and blue eyes, squatted over a hole in the ground filled with glowing charcoal. He kept this at the right temperature by means of a small sheepskin bellows. The silver he uses is made from rupee coins, which he melts down and then beats into thin wire.

306 He produced a tray full of semi-precious stones—agate, jade, chalcedony and jasper, some carved with Arabic inscriptions—which he uses as ring-settings. The stone Sparkes had chosen was a fine oval chalcedony with the words 'Mohammed bin Ali' engraved in old script. The setting consisted of a central hoop of thick silver, with two loops of twisted silver wire, hinged on either side. It looked barbaric, and the silver was rough and unpolished, but it made an effective ornament. I gave an order for a similar ring, to present to my wife, the cost being agreed, after some haggling, at five rupees.

294 413 Returning to the bazaar, we passed the tailors' shops, where men sat cross-legged on little wooden stools, sewing by hand or by machine, and I was reminded of the cobbler's scene in *Chu Chin*